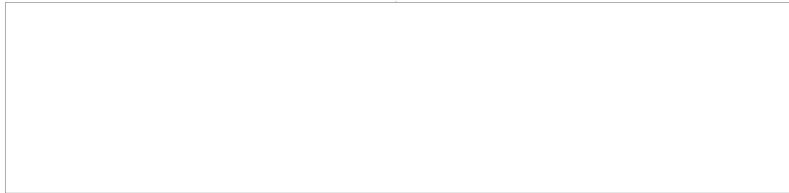


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Air Force Action in the December Operation on the middle Don

The December attack on the middle Don by the ground troops of the South-Western Front and of the left flank of the Voronezh Front was supported in the air by the 17th. and 2nd. Air Armies. The 17th. Air Army was detailed to support the 1st. and 3rd. Guards and the 5th. Tank armies while the 2nd. Air Army supported the 6th. Army of the Voronezh Front.

On account of the intensive combat of the period preceding the December operation, the 2nd. and 17th. Air Armies had in their establishment only a small number of poorly equipped air units and formations. The 2nd. Air Army was composed of only three air divisions (the 205th Fighter Division, the 227th. Ground Attack Division, and the 208th. Night Bomber Division,) with a small number of aircraft. Particularly weak was the 205th. Fighter Division, which had only 29 aircraft. Such a small number of aircraft was unable to provide neither the necessary air cover to the ground troops nor the necessary support to the ground attack aircraft. For this reason the 167th. Fighter Regiment (27-Yak-1 aircraft) was attached to the 2nd. Air Army from the recently formed 3rd. Mixed Air Corps.

The 17th. Air Army had on its establishment the 1st. Mixed Air Corps, the 282nd. Fighter Division with two attached ground attack regiments, the 221st. Bomber Division, and the 262nd. Night Bomber Division, with a total of 302 aircraft. With the purpose of strengthening the 17th. Air Army, which was to support an attack by three armies, the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps was placed under its command. The units of the Corps were formed, but by the beginning of the operation they were just beginning to concentrate on the designated airfields, and only the ground attack and not all of the Bomber Divisions. The Fighter Division (82 aircraft) and parts of the Bombers (14 aircraft) only completed their concentration on the 3rd. and 4th. day of the operation.

Thanks to reinforcements the air armies had on the 16th. of

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December the following number of aircraft: (Table 1.)

No. of Air Army	Fighter	Ground Attack	Bomber		Recce	Total
			Day	Night		
17	110	170	87	41	7	415
2	56	49	-	96	16	217
	166	219	87	137	23	632.

Despite the good work which had been done in the air units to repair damaged aircraft in the preparatory period of the operation (from the 3rd. to the 15th. of December), a large number (144) of damaged ones still remained. The number of unserviceable aircraft was particularly high in the fighter planes (32%) and in the ground attack (24%). It is obvious that the number of planes to support an attack by four armies over a 400 km front was clearly insufficient.

The 4th. German Air Army which, at the beginning of the operation, was stationed opposite the South-Western, Don and Stalingrad fronts, had about 1000 aircraft. The 8th. Air Corps of that air army was operating in the sector of the South-Western and Voronezh Fronts. It was composed of 27 bomber squadrons (in Millerovo), 76 bomber squadrons (in Tatsinsk and Morozovsk), 1 squadron of dive bombers (in Morozovsk), 1 fighter squadron, and several detachments of long-range reconnaissance aircraft. In addition, it has to be noted, that several groups of the 77th. and 55th. bomber squadrons flew over from other sectors of the front.

At the start of the operation the enemy aircraft was disposed as follows: Bombers - at Millerovo 80 to 100 He 111's, at Tatsinsk 100 Yu 88's, Morozovsk 90 to 100 Yu 87's; Fighters - in Morozovsk, Chernishkovsk and Bokovsk 70 to 90 Me 109's and Me 110's; Reconnaissance - Shalayevsk and Skosyrskaya 50 to 60 FV-189's and FV-106's.

In the forward airfields of Oravskiy, Mashary, Nikolayev, Medvedevskiy, svkl.Svetoch, Verkhniy Zaksay, the enemy periodically stationed 10 to 15 Me 109's and Me 110's.

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The total number of enemy aircraft based opposite the South-Western Front was between 450 and 500, of these 250 to 300 were bombers, 150 to 160 fighters, 50 to 60 artillery fire direction, and 30 to 40 transport planes.

It is important to note that in connection with the difficult position of the enemy's 6th Army at Stalingrad a considerable portion of its aircraft was stationed in the airfields of Tatsinsk and Prozovsk, that is, on the left flank of the South-Western Front. Such a disposition gave the enemy the opportunity to manoeuvre on this sector of the front by using the same supply facilities, but at the same time gave our aviation the opportunity to operate against their airfields.

Thus, at the beginning of the operation, the following were the comparative strength figures in aircraft (Table 2)

Serial	Types of aircraft	17th, and 2nd. Air Armies	Enemy
1.	Fighters	166	50 -160
2.	Ground Attack	219	- -
3.	Bombers	224	250 -300
4.	Reconnaissance	23	50 -60
Total		632	450 -520.

As can be seen from Table 2 the opposing forces were about equal. The slight superiority of our air force in bombers and ground attack aircraft can be explained by the inclusion in the number of bombers and ground attack aircraft of U-2 night bombers (over 100). During the course of the operation, when the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps had concentrated on the airfields of the 17th. Air Army, we had a superiority of one and a half in fighters.

It has to be taken into account that already before the start of the operation the enemy had begun to use his bombers to transport ammunition and rations to the troops encircled in Stalingrad as well

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as to the otel'nikovsk group and that he therefore was unable to divert his air strength from the south. Perhaps he was waiting for a more favorable strength ratio. This was fully borne out during the battle. Of the total number of aircraft of the 4th. Air Fleet reported opposite the South -Western Front and the Voronezh Front, the enemy never used more than about 35% in the period from the 16th to the 31st. of December, 1942. It follows that in the area of our advance no more than 350 -450 enemy aircraft operated.

Thus, the actual relationship of air strength during the course of the operation was 1:1.5 in our favor.

The following assignments had been given to the commanders of the air armies:

- prior to the start of the operation : to cover the main forces of our troops in the departure position; to destroy enemy aircraft on the airfields, as well as their headquarters, reserves and troops moving up to the front line; by night action to exhaust the enemy in the forward defended area particularly in the sectors of the 1st. and 2nd. Guards Armies.

- at the beginning of the operation: to cooperate with the ground troops of all attacking armies in the breakthrough of the enemy's defended area and during the action in the depth of the defended area.

- in support of the mobile forces introduced into the breakthrough: to provide air cover and to cooperate in the exploitation of the breakthrough.

In order to fulfil these assignments and in order to achieve close cooperation between air and ground troops on the field of battle, the air army commanders detailed a large proportion of their air units in direct support of the ground units. Thus, in the 17th. Air Army, the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps was to operate in the sector of the 1st. Guards Army; the 1st. Mixed Air Corps in the sector of the 3rd. Guards Army, and the 282 Fighter Division in the area of the 5th. Tank Army. In the 2nd. Air Army the 205th. Fighter

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and the 227th. Ground Attack Divisions were detailed to support the attack by the 6th. Army.

Three air divisions remained under direct control of the commander of the air armies, (the 221st. Bomber, the 262nd. and the 208th. Night Bomber Divisions), and they were given the following tasks:

- the 221st. Bomber Division (of the 17th. Air Army) was to conduct battle with the enemy air force on the airfields, Tatsinsk, Morozovsk, Millerovo, and G'lubokaya; to disrupt the transportation of troops on the railway lines Millerovo - Likhaya - Morozovsk; to destroy enemy troops withdrawing from the front of the 3rd. Guards and 5th. Tank Armies, as well as to prevent the movement of reserves and the area Tatsinsk - Morozovsk.

- the 262nd. Night Bomber Division (of the 17th. Air Army) was to conduct night activity to demoralize the troops in the direction of the back of the 1st. and 3rd. Guards Armies and to destroy enemy aircraft on their airfields.

- the 208th. Night Bomber Division (of the 2nd. Air Army) was to disrupt the enemy's transportation along the railway line Roesosht - Kautenirovka and to destroy enemy aircraft on the airfields Evshtevsk and Urazovo.

Thus the planned utilization of the majority of the available forces foresaw the distribution of the air force in four main directions and over a front extending over 400 km. It is to be noted that the distribution of aircraft in the four main directions was roughly equal. The 205th. and 227th. Ground Attack Divisions (of the 17th. Air Army), supporting the 6th. Army, had 115 aircraft. The 3rd. Mixed Air Corps, supporting the 1st. Guards Army, had, at the beginning of the operation 127 planes; the 1st. Mixed Air Corps, operating in the area of the 3rd. Guards Army, had 151 and the 282nd. Fighter Division, supporting the 5th. Tank Army, had 46 aircraft.

One's attention is drawn to the weakness of the air support of

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the 1st. Guards Army which was to operate in one of the more important directions. This can be explained by the fact that the more or less well-equipped (215 aircraft) 3rd, Mixed Air Corps, which had been detailed to its support, was unable to concentrate its fighters at the airfields. It is obvious that the absence of the fighters of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps, during the initial stages of the operation, not only made the provision of air cover for the ground troops impossible, but also made the task of the ground attack and bomber aircraft more difficult. All of the cover of the ground attack and bombers of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps, was provided by one fighter regiment which had been reassigned from the 1st. Mixed Air Corps to the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps, and which consisted of 14 Yak-7 aircraft, which were just as insufficient.

It is understandable that since the commander of the 17th. Air Army did not have enough aircraft to support properly an attack in one direction, that he stationed his aircraft in such a manner that his aircraft could not only wage battle in the area of the front to which they had been assigned but also could operate in the sectors of the neighboring all arms formations.

The plan of disposition of the aircraft was worked out with a view of stationing the aircraft close to the ground units which were to support so that they could be dispatched to the critical sectors of the front from many directions. Under the existing conditions, with the very extended front, and the shortage of laid lines or radio connection with the air formations, as well as with the limited air service units which were available (1 airfield service battalion) this was extremely difficult. The main difficulties in connection with the location of the air units were, therefore, signal communications, since often the air units and formations, of necessity, had to be located in areas which had permanent signal communications which were entirely wrongly laid out for the conduct of the battle. Sketch 4 shows the disposition of the aircraft at the

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beginning of the operation. (Not included in the translation - can be found on page 27 of the original.)

It is to be noted that such a disposition gave the commanders of the air armies the capability to concentrate a relatively large number of aircraft on the necessary sectors of the front without relocating the units. Thus the formations of the 2nd. Air Army and of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps could operate in the direction of the main thrust of the 6th. and the 1st. Guards Armies; in the sector of the 1st. Guards Army the 1st. Mixed Air Corps and the 282nd. Fighter Division, and in front of the 5th. Tank Army the 282nd. and 288th. Fighter Divisions.

At the beginning of the operation not all the air units had located on the airfields designated to them. For example, the 867th. Fighter Regiment (of the 2nd. Air Army) could not move to the airfield "Progress" (15 km north-east of Verkh. Mamont) to which it had been assigned since the airfield was not ready at the beginning of the operation. Parts of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps of the 17th. Air Army as has already been stated, could not complete its concentration by the start of the operation.

Despite the difficulties in locating the aircraft and the above mentioned failure to complete the plan of concentration, the main body of the air force was fairly close to the troops it was to support. The distance of the combat airfields from the troops was as follows: for the fighters and night bombers 20 to 40 km, for the ground attack 30 to 50 kms, and for the bombers 80 to 120 kms.

It is necessary to remark that joint location of fighter and ground attack aircraft had been envisioned on several airfields (the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps and the 282nd. Fighter Division) in order to facilitate joint action.

In order to facilitate the timely preparation of the airfield for the relocation of the aircraft, special reconnaissance elements of the airfield construction units had been sent out.

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These detachments were to follow the second echelon of the ground troops and were to reconnoitre the airfields evacuated by the enemy and locations which were suitable for the construction of airfields and airstrips.

The tasks of the air formations, cooperating with the ground forces, were set for the commanders of the air armies and the details worked out with the commanders of the ground armies. In addition, the commanders of the air corps and air divisions took part in the preparation of the planning of the cooperation between the two.

The direction of the supporting air formations was arranged as follows: the headquarters of the 2nd. Air Army was located in the immediate vicinity of the command post of the 6th. Army (in the area Verkhnyaya G'nilyusha). An auxiliary command post (VPU) was also organized which was manned by an operational group commanded by the Deputy Commander of the Air Army with the task of directing those formations which had been placed in immediate support of the ground troops (the 205th. fighter and the 227th. ground attack divisions). The plan provided laid line as well as radio communication with the formations from the auxiliary command post. But the radio sets assigned for the auxiliary command post did not arrive in time for the beginning of the operation and the remaining means of communications were entirely insufficient and the control of the air formations was entirely impossible. As a result, the headquarters of the 2nd. Air Army had to undertake the direction of the air formations which were under direct control of the ground troops, but its only means of communication with the 6th. Army was via the auxiliary command post. It is obvious that such method of control did not provide timely support of the ground troops during the course of the operation.

Control was much better organized in the 17th. Air Army. At the start of the operation an auxiliary command post for the commander of the 17th. Air Army was organized near the headquarters of the commander of the South - Western Front (in the town of Kalach).

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The auxiliary command post had laid line and radio communication with the headquarters of the air army and of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps and it had an operational group composed of the following: the deputy chief of staff, the deputy chief of the operational section, the officers of the operational section, the assistant chief of the reconnaissance section and the assistant chief signal officer.

The commanders of the air corps and divisions, having direct communications with their own units and the headquarters of the 3rd. Air Army were located directly in the command posts of the ground units from whence they directed the activities of their troops. In many instances, as rifle, tank and mechanized forces were operating in the main direction, there were seen officers of the air staff with their radio sets who ensured cooperation.

The direction of the air formations, exclusive of the 3rd. Mixed Corps, was achieved by the Air Army Commander via his headquarters. Such an organization of the direction made it possible to react sufficiently quickly to all changes in the situation and to dispatch air strength to the right location as required.

AIR ACTION IN THE PREPARATORY PHASE

The preparatory phase of the attack by the troops of the Southwestern Front covered the period from the 3rd. to the 15th. of December. During that period the 2nd. and 17th. Air Armies were given the following tasks:

- to conduct reconnaissance for the imminent operation, to photograph the enemy's defended area on the right shore of the Don, to cover the movement and direction of his operational reserves to the front.
- to disrupt the movement of troops and material supplies along the rail lines on the sectors Antemirovka - Likhaya and Likhaya - Ablyvskaya.
- to destroy enemy aircraft on the airfields Millerovo, Starobel'sk, Kamensk, Skosyrskaya, Tatsinsk, and Chernushkovsk.

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- to cover the concentration of our own ground troops in the areas Osetrovo, Bychok, Zamost'ye, Pogorelaya, and Oblivskaya.
- cooperation with the ground forces of the 5th. Tank Army in the fulfillment of its tasks.
- to prevent the movement of enemy reserves to the front line.

Considering the relatively small number of aircraft and the unfavorable meteorological conditions these tasks have to be considered rather high. In actual fact the air force was more or less able to complete its reconnaissance tasks and the coverage of the concentration of our own troops. Those tasks, such as the disruption of rail traffic and the destruction of enemy aircraft, although they were contained in the commander's orders, could not be fulfilled due to lack of strength.

Up to the beginning of the operation enemy aircraft was not very active. In the area of the 1st. Guards and 6th. Tank Armies, the Germans limited themselves to air reconnaissance of the concentration areas of our troops and our airfields. The only air strikes were rather weak ones delivered at railway stations in the rail towns Kalovaya and Malach. In an attempt to disrupt rail traffic for an extended period, the enemy concentrated on relatively intensive attacks on railway stations. Only rarely did the enemy check concentrations of our troops.

On the left flank of the front, in the area of the 3rd. Guards and 5th. Tank Armies, the enemy airforce was much more active. Enemy reconnaissance aircraft penetrated to a depth of 150 to 200 kms; fighters constantly covered their own troops in the areas Nizhne-Chirskaya, Termosin, as well as the railway Likhaya - Morozovsk-Oblivskaya and his bombers operated actively against our troops in the areas Surovikino - Sviridovsk (12 km south-east of Surovikino). The strongest air action against our troops in that area occurred on the 5th. to the 10th. to the 12th. of December, 1942, reaching between 100 and 300 plane flights daily.

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Our air force started its combat activities in connection with the operation only from the 8th. of December, 1942. Up to that date poor meteorological conditions prevented air activity. The enemy air force could not operate in that period, either.

From the 8th. to the 15th. of December, 1942, despite poor weather conditions, aircraft of the 17th. and 2nd. Air Armies flew 1263 missions, of these:

212 flights were enemy troop reconnaissance.

38 flights were attacks on railroads and trains.

124 flights were attacks on enemy airfields.

465 flights were made to cover our own troops, and to cover ground attack and bomber missions.

424 flights were made against enemy troops on the battlefield, of these 230 being night flights.

From these figures it can be seen that our air activity was concentrated on providing air cover for our troops on the ground and on attacks on enemy troops in the battle area. The greater number of these missions were flown in front of the left-flanking armies (the 5th. Tank and 3rd. Guards) where our ground troops were more active and where enemy activity was greater.

The greater number of missions (1151) were flown by the aircraft of the 17th. Air Army, which, in cooperation with the 5th. Tank Army of the South-Western Front, inflicted serious losses on the enemy. According to the records of the headquarters of the 17th. Air Army, 366 missions were flown in the period from the 8th. to the 15th. of December. Through these missions the following were destroyed: about 40 tanks; 13 field and 34 anti-aircraft guns; up to 300 automobiles; 60 vehicles; an ammunition depot; as well as a large number of enemy personnel. In addition, fighter aircraft engaged in 62 air battles in which 27 enemy planes were destroyed.

On the right flank of the front (in front of the 6th. and 1st. Guards Armies) there was only limited action by our aircraft. The

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fighter planes by patrolling in the air and on the airfields covered the concentration of our troops in the areas Kazinka, Ol'khovatka (18 km west of Verkh. Mamon), Verkh. Gnilusha, Mzh. Mamon, Zamost'ye, Bogorelov (8-12 km south of Petropavlovk); the night bombers exhausted enemy troops in the direction of our main thrust in the area Bobinskiy, Dubovikovka (15 to 30 km east of Nov. Alitva).

In the preparatory phase air reconnaissance by the 2nd. and 17th. Armies covered fully the whole system of the enemy's defences and photographed the main defended area on the right shore of the rivers Don and Chir in the sector from Rossosh to Mzhne-Chirskaya to a depth of between 12 and 15 km. Besides that, photo recce was also undertaken of the areas of concentration of reserves and of many airfields in Kantemirovka, Millerovo, Tatsinsk and Morozovsk.

Air reconnaissance covering the location of the enemy's heavy operational reserves opposite our front established that there were prepared defences in the enemy's operational depth. It has to be noted that air reconnaissance was good and the ground command mapped detailed information for the plan for the breakthrough of the enemy's defended area.

The well-organized reconnaissance of enemy aircraft bases gave us the opportunity to deliver great strikes on the airfields of Millerovo, Tatsinsk, Chernishovsk, during the time that a large number of aircraft were concentrated on those airfields. By attacks on the airfields and in air battles about 120 enemy aircraft were destroyed.

Of those tasks which had been assigned to the air command, the interruption of rail traffic had been the least successful. On this important task only 38 missions had been flown and most of these at night. But it is understandable that with the available forces, even under the most favorable circumstances, it would have been impossible to disrupt rail communications.

AIR ACTION DURING THE OPERATION

During the whole period of the operation (from the 16th. to the 1st. of December, 1942) weather conditions were not favorable to

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air action. In that period the 17th. Air Army could fly only on ten days and seven nights, and the 2nd. Air Army only on six days and eight nights. The weather was particularly bad during the initial phases of the operation. Up till the 19th. of December there was heavy fog, and from the 20th. to the 24th. of December the fog was added low ceilings and snow which prevented all air activity.

Thus, during the whole operation, and particularly in the period of the more or less bitter fighting of the ground troops (from the 15th. to the 24th. of December) air action was sporadic and limited on account of meteorological conditions.

Air Action in the Period of the Breakthrough of the Enemy Defended Area

During the night to the 16th. of December, as well as during the artillery preparation and during the attack of the troops of the 1st. and 3rd. Guards Armies our air force could not operate on account of heavy fog.

The ground forces started the attack after the artillery preparation at 0930 hours on the 16th. of December without air support from our own aviation and in the absence of enemy air activity. At the same time our troops encountered heavy fire concentrations and enemy counter attacks and were therefore not successful. Only the 6th. Army in the direction of its main thrust was able to break through the enemy defences and by the end of the day had advanced a distance of from 2 to 3 kms. The 1st. Guards Army was able to penetrate the enemy defences in isolated sectors but the 3rd. Guards Army was able to advance only a few hundred meters in the direction of its main thrust.

In the middle of the day the weather improved over the area of the 6th. and 1st. Guards Armies and made some air action possible.

Relatively intensive air action took place in the area of the rear of the 1st. Guards Army. There the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps flew 15 missions with ground attack aircraft in a short period. The air

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strikes were delivered with the aim of surprising enemy fire positions and their centers of resistance in the direction of the main thrust by our troops in the area G'adyuch'ye and Filinovo as well as to intercept the movement of reserves from the areas Tverdokhlebozhenskoye, Boguchar. Attacking ~~the~~ troops on the battlefield fighters and the reserves which were being moved forward with numbers, 10 tanks and 45 vehicles were destroyed, and the fire of several artillery battalions was subdued. This was of considerable help to the advancing troops of the 1st. Guards Army.

Joint action by ground forces of the 6th. and 3rd. Guards Armies and air troops during the first day was insignificant. The 2nd. Air Army, supporting the 6th. Army, flew only 68 missions, of these 50 were directed against the enemy troop concentrations in the areas Ivanovka and Tverdokhlebo and for the suppression of enemy artillery positions on the battlefield areas Nov.Kalitva, Derezhovka, Rasno-~~ye~~zhnovoye; 9 missions were flown to cover our troops and 9 were reconnaissance flights. In the zone of the 3rd. Guards Army aircraft of the 1st. Mixed Air Corps flew only 31 missions attacking enemy ~~troops~~ troops in the areas Bokovsk, Vislogubov, and Krashilin.

The low activity in the sectors of the 6th. and 3rd. Guards Armies was not entirely due to bad weather but also to poor direction from headquarters. This was particularly true in the 2nd. Air Army. The worst example was that the 17th. Tank Corps was without air support for the entire day while the 867th. Fighter Division was inactive because the airfield "Progress" was not yet ready.

Enemy aircraft did not seriously oppose our advance because of the fog and the low ceiling over their airfields. During the day only reconnaissance flights by single enemy aircraft were observed and there was only one instance when a group of bombers (15 aircraft) tried to attack troops of the 1st. Guards Army, but this attack was dispersed by our fighters. During the whole day only 61 enemy flights were observed. Our fighters became involved in three air battles in

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which one Me 109 was destroyed.

Despite the bad weather the 221st. Bomber Division delivered an attack on the airfields of Tatsinsk and Morozovsk where about 5 enemy aircraft (Yu-88 and Yu-52) were destroyed.

In the following days the attack by our ground forces was more successful. Despite the determined resistance of the enemy, by the end of the 17th. of December the forward defences in the direction of the main thrusts of the 6th. and 1st. Guards Armies had been pierced. On the 18th. of December the same was achieved by the 3rd. Guards Army. On the 19th. of December began the pursuit of the enemy along the entire front.

In this period the aircraft of the 2nd. and 17th. Air Armies cooperated significantly with the ground troops. It has to be noted that while in the first few days our air force could cooperate without meeting any enemy air opposition (because of bad weather preventing them from leaving their airfields) during the following days enemy opposition in the air increased considerably. Our air force did not only have to deal with the enemy aircraft which were based opposite to South-Western Front but also with a number of fighter detachments which were being sent up from a southerly direction.

The enemy aircraft was more active on the 17th. of December. During that day 517 enemy flights were counted by our troops which was about the same number as ours (577). The approximately even strength of ours and the enemy's ~~air force~~ made the work of our air force much more difficult with the result that in the 2nd. Air Army and in the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps the ground attack aircraft could not fulfil its task completely because of its lack of fighter cover, and besides that several detachments of ground attack and bomber planes meeting strong enemy opposition, had to return without fulfilling their missions.

In the following days enemy air activity diminished considerably every day. Thus on the 18th. of December only 343 flights were counted and on the 19th. of December only 278.

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Just as it had been observed during the preparatory period, enemy air activity was much greater opposite the left-flanking armies (3rd. Guards and 5th. Tank Armies). This can be explained by the enemy's attempt to hold the defended boundary closest to his encircled forces in Stalingrad at all costs. With the loss of the River Chir line, the enemy lost the capability to relieve the encircled Paulus group at Stalingrad with the northern grouping which had assembled for that purpose. This also lowered his capability to supply the encircled troops by air.

Beginning with the 17th. of December and till the 20th. inclusive, enemy fighter aircraft covered their ground troops while groups of 5 to 20 bombers attacked our advancing ground forces.

Enemy air activity was of much lesser intensity opposite the fronts of the 6th. and 1st. Guards Armies, but during the decisive battle periods the enemy was able to assemble a large number of aircraft which made the task of our advancing very difficult. Thus, for example, during the second half of the 17th. of December, enemy fighter groups of a strength of 2 to 10 aircraft, covered by fighters, inflicted serious losses on the troops of the 6th. Army on the field of battle. On the 18th. of December, when the materials for crossing the river Bogucharka began to be brought forward, enemy aircraft began to bomb troops of the 1st. Guards Army on the field of battle as well as in the rear, and prevented the forward movement of our river-crossing materials.

Thus, the activity of our air force was conducted under conditions of active resistance by the enemy, requiring the continuous cover of our ground attack aircraft and bombers by fighters.

The small number of our fighter aircraft, as well as the lack of fighter units (and formations) at the disposal of the commander of the 17th. Air Army for reinforcing individual sectors of the front, gave the enemy the opportunity to concentrate superior forces in the desired direction.

Thus, for example, on the 18th. of December, in the zone of the

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1st. Guards Army, on account of a deficiency of fighters and the continuous attack of the ground forces, by enemy bombers in the area of Tverdokhlebov (20 km south of Verkh. Mamontov), the commander of the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps was forced to employ ground attack aircraft (IL-2) to provide air cover for the battlefield. The utilization of ground attack aircraft for providing air cover at a height of 1000 to 1500 meters to disperse enemy bomber groups worked fairly successfully at the beginning. But after two hours of such patrolling, by our ground attack aircraft, the enemy sent in fighters. During the resulting battles, our ground attack aircraft suffered serious losses (8 IL-2).

With the aim of achieving control of the air (besides the battles of our fighters with enemy aircraft on the field of battle) the 221st. Bomber, and the 262nd. and 208th. Night Bomber Divisions which were under the direct control of the commander of the Air Army, flew 59 missions (of these 21 during the night) against the enemy aerodromes Millerovo, Tatsinsk, Morozovsk, Evstratovsk. About 12 aircraft were destroyed in these raids. In addition our fighters fought 45 air battles in which 33 enemy aircraft were shot down.

Despite the strong enemy air opposition and the bad meteorological conditions, which made flying impossible for long periods of each day, our air force was very active. In the first five days of the attack 1660 missions were flown in the day and 407 at night. This is about 5 missions for every serviceable aircraft.

Worthy of note is the great difference in the numbers and types of missions flown in the sectors of the different armies despite the approximately equal numbers of types of aircraft in each. Thus, in the zone of the 1st. Guards Army, only 313 missions were flown, while in the sector of the 3rd. Guards Army, 731 missions were flown. It is also necessary to mention that in the 1st. Mixed Air Corps, and in the 282nd. Fighter Division each serviceable aircraft flew between 6 to 10 missions in the period from the 16th. to the 20th. of December, while in the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps, the corresponding

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figure was 2.5 missions on the average. Such a low figure for the battle activity in the 3rd. Mixed Air Corps can be explained by the failure to use fighters to cover ground attack and bomber aircraft, lack of repair facilities on the airfields and the lack of POL. In addition this condition was aggravated by the lack of technical personnel.

As it can be seen, because of meteorological conditions and the limited number of aircraft, our air force was only able to fulfil a portion of its assignment.

Only one of the tasks - cooperation with the ground troops during the breakthrough of the enemy defence line - was accomplished satisfactorily. Conducting a large number (over 1200) direct attacks on the enemy on the field of battle helped our ground forces considerably. There were many clear examples of our air force disrupting the enemy's plans and thereby assisting our ground troops.

At 0720 hours on the 20th. of December a report was received at the command post of the 5th. Tank Army of an enemy assembly in the area Verkhne - Aksenovskiy, Nizhne - Solonovskiy (20 to 30 km south-west of Yuzhne-Chirskaya). A reconnaissance patrol consisting of 2 Yak-7 aircraft which had been sent out by the commander of the 132nd. Fighter Division established by 0800 hours that about 70 tanks, 30 vehicles, and a large number of enemy infantry had assembled in that area.

Between 0800 hours and until 1400 hours, starting with signals from the command post of the 5th. Tank Army, five groups of ground attack aircraft consisting of 4 to 5 planes each, covered by 4-7 Yak 7-b's, were despatched to that area. They delivered effective strikes. Between 1500 hours and 1530 hours, that is, immediately prior to the attack of our ground forces in that area, a strike by a large number of ground attack and fighter aircraft was delivered. As a result, of the coordination of time and place of the air action with the attack of our ground troops, the area Nizhne-Solonovskiy was taken with few losses.

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On the 20th. of December, the enemy concentrated about a regiment of infantry for a counter attack in the area south of Nov. Melitssa (4 km west of Nov. Kalitva). Thanks to an attack by aircraft of the 2nd. Air Army, lasting for two hours, the enemy infantry suffered such heavy losses that the counter attack was disrupted.

It has to be mentioned that the presence of the commanders of the air formations at the command posts of the ground force formations considerably improved joint action between the services on the field of battle. A serious weakness was the poor manner in which ground troops detailed their positions. Our aircraft frequently had to waste time in finding the location of our troops before attacking. Incidents occurred when our air force, not being able to locate our ground troops accurately, delivered their strikes 10 to 15 km away from the desired target.

The most intensive air action during the whole period took place in the zone of the 3rd. Guards Army. Despite the strong enemy air opposition in this sector, the fighter aircraft of the 1st. Mixed Air Corps were able to provide air cover for our troops throughout the whole operation, and the activity of the ground attack aircraft was of great assistance to the ground troops in the direction of the main thrust. In the whole period from the 16th. to the 20th. of December, 381 covering missions were flown by the fighters and 332 missions against the enemy in the field of battle were flown by the ground attack aircraft. Air action on the field of battle accounted for the destruction of up to 30 tanks, 50 guns, 2 ammunition depots, many motor vehicles, transports, and personnel of the enemy. The fighters conducted 25 air battles in which 21 enemy aircraft were destroyed.

During the first phase of the operation, the air force was able, through its night and day attacks, to disrupt the enemy's work of rear services and the forward movement of reserves. These tasks were fulfilled by the limited forces under the direct control of the command of the 17th. Air Army (the 221st. Bomber and units of the

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262 Night Bomber Divisions). These forces, besides striking at the enemy's airfields, dealt several severe blows at the railway stations Gllubokaya, Millerovo, and at the enemy reserves in the areas Millerovo, Lamenka, and Kashary.

The shortage of aircraft during the attack nevertheless proved significant. Thus, on the 18th. of December our reconnaissance observed a large forward movement of enemy reserves by road and along the rail lines Rossosh' - Mitrofanovka, Lantemirovka - Kamensk, Belchalitvenskaya * Chernishkovskiy. Only the general shortage of aircraft prevented the delivery of a powerful strike at these rail movements. The inability of our air force to disrupt the rail movement enabled the enemy to move two fresh infantry divisions into the sector of the 6th. Army of the Voronezh Front as well as to move reserves opposite the left flank of the South-Western Front in time to oppose the attack of the 5th. Tank Army.

The activity of the night bombers, who utilized liberally every opportunity for action, had a considerable influence on the course of the battle. In every one of the long winter nights they flew 3 or 4 missions. In the night of the 16th. to the 17th. of December a group of the 370th. Night Bomber Regiment (16 U-2 aircraft), operating in the zone of the 1st. Guards Army, flew 88 missions, that is, 5 to 6 flights for every serviceable aircraft.

The good results and the high effectiveness of the aircraft U-2 were the result of good organization of its operational work in the 370th. Night Bomber Regiment. As is correct, they operated from air strips 5 to 15 kms behind the front line. The Regimental Commander, after receiving his orders from the commander of the 17th. Air Army, flew to the commander of the air force unit, confirmed the targets with him, and then issued his orders to his flight personnel.

Each airstrip sent out a post equipped with signal rockets (or torches) and connected directly by telephone with the airstrips.

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The flight personnel knew the exact location of each of these outposts, as well as the distance and direction of the target from there.

Each outpost was informed immediately of the departure of a flight and started to give signals to assist the aircraft in finding the target. The flight from the outpost to the target was determined by time and course of flight. The next flight did not depart until the post reported the return of the first one.

It is necessary to remark that the poorly organized signal system between the auxiliary command posts of the 2nd. Air Army and their air units supporting the ground troops of the 6th. Army, seriously detracted from the effectiveness of their activity during the first few days of the attack. In actual fact the auxiliary command posts turned into relay stations for the staff of the 2nd. Air Army. In practice this resulted in the delay of transmittance of orders and of the departure of flights. Thus on the second day of the operation, enemy aircraft discovered our tanks in the area of Verkh. Mamon, and started to bomb these heavily. Because of lack of communications, timely aircover for these troops was not provided, although enough fighters for the task were available.

Besides that, the air units and formations were not familiar with the ground situation. As a result of this daily operations had to be started by a reconnaissance of the position of the ground troops.

AIR FORCE ACTION IN THE PERIOD OF THE PURSUIT

During the first few days of the pursuit (from the 21st. to the 24th. of December) the air force could not operate because of bad weather (fog, snowfall, low ceiling). An exception was the 21st. of December when 52 missions were flown (reconnaissance and attacks on the withdrawing enemy). Thus our ground forces operated without air support till the 25th. of December, 1942.

The enemy air force, having suffered serious losses in the first phase of the operation, and forced to re-locate on rear

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airfields, also reduced its activity. They did not fly over 200 to 250 missions daily mainly against our tank and mechanized troops, in the area Millerovo - Skpsyrskaya, Tatsinsk, Morozovsk, Milyutinsk, and Chernishkovsk. On several days enemy air activity against our mobile troops was heavier.

Beginning with the 25th. of December and till the end of the operation, our air force operated days and nights with determination.

Its main tasks, in that period, were cooperation with the ground forces and provision of air cover. Our air force fulfilled these tasks mainly in connection with the all-arms formations. The tank and mechanized corps, having broken through towards the end of the 24th. of December, were fighting with enemy units in the area Millerovo, Milyutinsk, and Tatsinsk, that is, 200 to 250 km from our air bases. As a result of the great distance separating our airfields from the mobile troops, and the obscure situation in the area of operation of the tank and mechanized corps, these had to operate of necessity without the help of our air force.

Action by our air force against enemy troops during the pursuit was of much lower intensity than in the first phase of the operation. Of the 2750 missions flown in the 10 days of the pursuit (from the 21st. to the 31st. of December) 1942 only 830 missions were flown against enemy troops. Particular objects of attack were assemblies of enemy troops and columns of withdrawing enemy soldiers.

It has to be noted that cooperation between the air force and the ground forces on the field of battle during the pursuit was poor. This was caused by the absence of necessary signal communications between the two forces, poor information concerning their positions given by the ground forces and the careless work of the air force representatives stationed at the ground force command posts. Frequently the action by the air force was conducted without any tactical signal connection with the ground forces.

The enemy, after our forces had broken through his defences,

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began to throw significant forces into the area of Tatsinsk and Morozovsk from Rossosh' and Voroshilovgrad. On the 25th. of December our reconnaissance by air noted heavy rail movements along the lines Ostrogozhsk - Valynki and Likhaya * Tatsinsk.

From this time more or less intensive around-the-clock action was started by the 2nd. and 17th. Air Armies in order to disrupt the rail movement in the period from the 25th. to the 28th. of December. During that period over 450 missions were flown (70% of these at night) on railway stations and echelons in the sectors Rossosh', Podgornoye, Ostrogozhsk - Valuyki, and Likhaya * Tatsinsk. Our air action was not able to stop all rail movement but it was able to reduce its speed considerably. This had a beneficial effect on the activities of our troops.

During the course of the operation considerable work had been done on the airfields in the territory liberated from the Germans. The reconnaissance detachments sent out by the airfield construction units, following after the 2nd. echelon of our advancing troops, found 62 places which were suitable for the construction of airfields and the airfield construction units inspected 35 partially and 20 fully prepared, ready for service, airfields. This made the relocation of the air units possible by the 26th. of December, in locations immediately adjacent to the ground troops.

CONCLUSION

Despite the bad meteorological conditions and the shortage of aircraft, the aviation of the 17th. and 2nd. Air Armies, thanks to determined fighting in the wintry weather, was of considerable assistance to the ground troops during the breakthrough of the enemy defended zone, during the action in the depth of the defenses as well as the advance on the railroad line Likhaya, Tatsinsk, Morozovsk.

In the period of the operation our air force conducted unceasing reconnaissance of the battlefield and the surrounding areas, pro-

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vided air cover for our own troops, destroyed enemy personnel on the battlefield, delivered many strikes at enemy airfields and disrupted the forward movement of his operational reserves.

In the period from the 16th. to the 31st. of December, 1942, our air force flew 4824 missions, which were distributed as follows:

Task	17th. Air Army	2nd. Air Army	Total
Action against enemy ground troops	1589	557	2146
Providing air cover for ground troops & escorting ground attack and bombers.	1315	144	1459
Strikes against airfields	212	81	293
Strikes against rail transport	265	252	517
Reconnaissance	291	118	409
Sum	3672	1152	4824
Of these, by night	477	775	1252.

From the above table it can be seen that the greatest number of missions were flown against enemy ground troops and to provide air cover for our troops. These were the most important tasks and the efforts of the 17th. and 2nd. Air Armies were concentrated on these.

Operating throughout the whole operation under difficult meteorological conditions, in the face of enemy anti-aircraft artillery fire and of enemy fighters in the air, our air force inflicted heavy

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losses on enemy equipment and personnel. According to the records of the headquarters of the 17th. and 2nd. Air Armies, during the operation the following were destroyed or made unserviceable : about 100 tanks, 150 guns of various calibre, 30 armored vehicles, 15 depots of POL and ammunition, a large number of motor vehicles, and enemy personnel. In addition, the fighters conducted over 200 aerial battles in which 95 enemy aircraft were shot down and 14 damaged.

Because of the shortage of aircraft our air force was unable to fulfil all the tasks demanded on a front of four armies, for that reason such important tasks as the destruction of enemy aircraft on the airfields, the disruption of rail traffic etc., received relatively little attention. An increase in the activity in these fields would have had to be made at the cost of reducing the effort against the enemy troops on the battlefields and this was not permissible. It has to be noted that, due to the good reconnaissance conducted by the air force, the strikes on targets beyond the airfields were most effective. Thus, for example, according to the records of the headquarters of the air armies, in the period from the 3rd. to the 31st. of December, 1942, in 417 missions flown against airfields 180 enemy aircraft were destroyed.

The relatively small (in relation to the whole attack) enemy superiority in aircraft and the main concentrations of his strength on the left flank of our advancing troops created some difficulties. Constant air cover for our ground troops was required as well as escorts for our ground attack and bombers with a clearly unfavorable ratio of fighters to other aircraft (at the beginning of the operation there were four times as many ground attack and bomber aircraft as fighters). Under these circumstances, the decision by the command of the 17th. Air Army to support the left flank (the 3rd. Guards and 5th. Tank Army) with the formations having a larger percentage of fighters, was correct. This made for more adequate

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air cover of ground troops of the left wing possible.

The successful action of our aviation on the battlefield during the breakthrough of the defended zone was, to a great degree, made possible by the presence of the air commanders at the ground force command posts. Thanks to this arrangement, coordinated action between the units of the 17th. Air Army and the ground forces was satisfactory, in the direction of the main thrust during the first phase of the attack. The greatest weakness in obtaining joint action was the fact that the ground troops were weak in giving accurate information concerning their actual dispositions during the battle. This reduced considerably the effectiveness of the air force.

The described operation shows of what tremendous importance the organization of a good system of communication, particularly of radio, with air force formations (and units) is in the conduct of a battle. The coordination as planned by the staff of the 2nd. Air Army was sufficiently well worked out but it failed to achieve the desired result because of the lack of radio stations at the auxiliary command posts.

The following deficiencies of our air force during the course of the operation have to be noted:

1. The failure of manoeuvre of our aircraft between the various sectors of the front which resulted in an almost equal disposition of our air force between four advancing armies. The air formations fought only in the sectors of the armies to which they had been assigned while the organization of control and the disposition of the aircraft was so organized in the 17th. Air Army that fighting in the zones of the neighboring armies would have been possible. This possibility was not exploited in full measure and as a result the enemy, in a majority of instances, concentrating his strength on narrow sectors, was frequently able to achieve equality, and quite often, superiority, in the air.

2. The particularly poor coordination of ground and air forces during the pursuit of the enemy into his rear areas. Our air force

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operated without tactical communication with our mobile forces. This gave the enemy air force the opportunity to attack our mobile forces without retribution.

3. Insufficient concentrations in the attacks on enemy rail movements. These attacks were conducted by our air force simultaneously in several directions. Thus, for example, in the period from the 25th. to the 28th. of December our air force attacked the rail lines Rossosh' - Podgornoye; Ostrogozhsk - Valuyki; and Likhaya - Tatsinsk. It is obvious that action by a limited number of aircraft on three separate railways did not produce the desired results.

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